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Oris C. Amos Interview, Professor Emeritus at Wright State University

Alyce Earl Jenkins
Wright State University - Main Campus

Oris Carter Amos
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Profiles of African-Americans That Helped Shape Wright State University

Interview with Oris Amos

Date of Interview: 1992

Interviewer: Alyce Earl Jenkins, College of Education and Human Services

Interviewee: Oris Carter Amos, Professor Emeritus at Wright State University

Intro: The College of Education and Human Services at Wright State has also had involvement of African Americans in various departments for many, many years. One of the persons who’s made significant contributions to the College of Education and to Wright State, Dr. Oris Carter Amos, who came in 1975 as Assistant Professor in Special Education. Upon her retirement in 1988, Oris was a full Professor and she had been successful in obtaining certifications for several programs within the College of Education. Oris speaks to us about her many contributions.

Alyce Earl Jenkins: Our guest today is Dr. Oris Amos, Professor Emeritus at Wright State University. Thanks so much for joining us today Oris. Oris has spent about thirteen years here at Wright State in the department of Special Education in the College of Education and Human Services. Oris, tell me a little bit about what you had done prior to your time at Wright State to make Wright State want to hire you, made them want to bring you on board.

Oris Amos: Well my teaching expands over the nursing [tape inaudible] level. I taught two years at Ohio State in the Special Education department and then I moved to Otterbein and I taught four years at Otterbein College. So, while I was at Otterbein I was recruited twice. I was recruited once and I didn’t come because I had some things that I was doing at Otterbein that I wanted to continue to do. The second time around I accepted the offer to come.

AJ: That's great. [inaudible] Um, you mentioned that you were in Special Education at Ohio State and then you came here in Special Education as an Associate Professor in 1975.

OA: I came here as an Assistant. I was an Assistant at Otterbein and I tried to negotiate the Associate and I was told that I need to be here and to let people know the kinds of things that I can do so they could look at my skills before I could be moved into
Associate. So I was at Wright State for two years before I went through the process and won the Associate Professor so I came in ’75, in 1977 I was made an Associate.

AJ: And then when did you become full Professor?

OA: Two years later. I really had my goal as one year but it took two years.

AJ: That’s great. Now that was ’75, ‘77’, and in ’79 you were a full Professor?

OA: Yes.

AJ: Now, tell me some of the things that you did during those intervening years from the time you became you came here as an Assistant Professor to the time you became a full Professor. What were some of the courses that you developed or programs that you developed in Special Education?

OA: Well when I was invited to come, um, in ’75, one of the reasons that I came I was told that I could develop a certification program. So when I came I developed a certification program in the education of the severely disabled. And they did not have courses in the orthopedically impaired, that’s one of my areas of expertise so I developed courses in the orthopedically impaired for certification. And I developed the program in the education of the multiply handicapped for certification through the state department.

AJ: That’s really outstanding because I remember during the years that you were here that Wright State’s Special Education department gained, had quite a reputation in those areas so what you’re saying is you developed those areas and not only did you develop them but you made sure that they were outstanding ’cause I remember the guy from the State Department coming down saying that we were the leaders in those areas.

OA: Well we were one of the few universities to offer certification in those two areas and consequently the State Department looked upon us very favorably and some of other universities used some of the objectives that we developed to develop their courses in the multiply handicapped. So I’m real proud of the fact that I mothered a program here.

AJ: That’s great. That’s great. About how many students do you think came through those two, those three programs?

OA: Well, as you know the education of the severely disabled is a low incidence so there are fewer youngsters in that program than would be in some of the other programs so our population of course in the courses would be somewhat smaller than when you’re talking about the mildly disabled because there are more of them, but I
know our enrollment in courses reached as many as 30 in each one of those courses when I was here.

AJ: Now you also developed a track of courses dealing with multi-culturalism didn’t you?

OA: I did and that’s one of the prides that I had here because I chaired the committee that developed our objectives in the College of Education for teaching in a multi-cultural pluralistic society. We had people from across the campus who helped to develop those objectives so I feel really good about that program too because, you know, there was a lot of work to be done. Uh, sometimes people don’t understand when you develop courses for credit, especially in teacher education, they have to be approved by the State Department of Education. So there’s a lot of work back and forth being sure that those objectives are acceptable by the Board of Education and also acceptable by National Learned Societies, because the State always asks about the National Learned Societies that will accept those objectives. So there is a lot of work that is done to develop courses that are certified, that are in certification tracks.

AJ: Now, when did you, do you recall the year that you developed the multi-cultural pluralistic core?

OA: That was in the ‘80s the early ‘80s.

AJ: So we were ahead of several universities as far as having such a program and making it available to our students, I mean now everybody’s talking about diversity but we started the…

OA: We were actually again in a leadership position in Ohio with a course in teaching in a multi-cultural pluralistic society again the State Department began to require that every teacher that went into public schools should have a course in teaching in a pluralistic society. And interestingly, some universities decided to piece mill and put an objective here or there in teaching in a pluralistic society. The College of Education chose to have a course and then to have some strands that would run through all the other courses and I chaired much of the work that was done in that area. [Noreen] Jones, Michael Williams and I did a source book for and to be used in those classes that we had.

AJ: You know it’s really interesting not only were you a leader in developing those courses but uh, Wright State, because you were here at Wright State, Wright State was a leader at that area and I think a lot of people out in the community are not aware that we were pioneering in that area particularly all the people out in the black community, so I think that that’s pretty outstanding that you did it and it was successful. During your your teaching here at Wright State and Ohio State and Otterbein, did you ever
encounter any challenges in the classroom from students or colleagues and if you did uh, how did you turn those challenges into opportunities?

OA: Oh, I, I feel that I helped to integrate all three of those universities because I was the first black faculty in Special Ed at Ohio State. I was the first black faculty member at Otterbein College, and so.

AJ: Were you very lonely? [laughter]

OA: I was very busy. In each one of those cases that I was invited to the university they had special things that they wanted me to do, so um, I was extremely busy getting those objectives done that they had invited me to do. And I think that when you look at there’s one black faculty member, uh, I believe there’s conflict ’cause I think that one person is less threatening and depending on what objectives are there for that person it depends a great deal on what the conflict conflict level [break in video] think if you get Afro Americans involved in universities sometimes [break in video] the [break in video] set up the feeling of competition and of conflict. So I did have my problems, especially at Ohio State. At the time I was there there was a great deal of racism, uh there was a great deal of conflict about the fact that there were no representatives, numbers of black faculty at that large university. So that was a conflict that was ongoing while I was there. So I have had my difficulties but I really feel that the conflicts have grown as the numbers of black faculty and black students have gone to predominately white universities.

AJ: Do you have any suggestions as to or any advice to young black faculty person as to how they should go about handling these various challenges from colleagues and students that are not by and large not related to core content but more related to personalities or some other kinds of beliefs that they may have about people?

OA: I think the first thing is to be aware that they probably will have some conflicts and some feelings of rejection, uh, feelings that how did you happen to get this job, from some people, and I think that if you don’t go in knowing that that is possible, so that you’re not all of a sudden faced with it that is helpful. I think to go in knowing that you have been invited because you have certain skills and I think that is something that sometimes the university community and students don’t understand, that when you’re invited, often you have been, you have already been in competition with other people and you are chosen because there is some special skill that you have, you’re not chosen because of color, but you are chosen because there is a feeling that if we invite you this is an objective or these are some objectives we want you to carry out. So I think that it is very important that uh supervisors of departments or chairpersons let it be known that we have invited this person because he or she is very good in this area and
the expectations for this person are very unique and I think sometimes that is not very well defined.

AJ: Yes, it’s not communicated. Let’s go, in order to move from Assistant, to Associate, to full Professor, you also in addition to teaching had to uh, make contributions uh in, the professional service, university service and community service. Tell me about some of the community and professional activities that you’ve been involved in here at Wright State.

OA: I think that I’ve been on almost every committee that is possible to be on to be a member of um, I was on, some of the big committees have been uh, the tenure committee, uh, the uh, library committee, the faculty affairs committee and these are university committees. Then I have college committees, promotion and tenure committees that lead into the university committee and I did serve on the promotion and tenure committee here at Wright State, so my committee load was always very heavy both at my college level, at my faculty level in special education, and then I was very active in all or many of the committees here on campus. I was also on many of the committees that selected the administrators, the president, the vice president, so I helped to elect two different presidents and that really takes a lot of time. Um, so those, as far as the college I had a lot of service on committees. In the community I was often involved with school meetings, uh, schools often ask us as special ed faculty, especially when mainstreaming was just beginning, we were doing a lot of schools and meetings with speaking and so on, so uh, I was quite busy in those services activities.

AJ: I was thinking about one of your awards here and uh, I’m doing this a little differently. The first award is from the Ohio Federation Council for Exceptional Children, Educator of the Year of 1982. Now you were talking about your different service and your teaching, uh, tell me about the the, what happened to make you the one selected of the recipient for this particular award, what was the criteria for selection?

OA: Every year a person is chosen over the State who has made outstanding contributions in special education, generally, not just in one unique area. One of my students submitted my name, nominated me, and her letter was beautiful, I virtually broke down in tears when they read the letter, I had not heard the letter and the uh person, the selection committee said that after having read that letter that it was very easy to select me but, they did send in all the different credentials for all the different areas from which I’d taught, letters from students, the fact that I had served as president of the Council for Exception Children in Columbus, Ohio, we had somewhere around 300 students, had participated in many other activities regarding special education students, so uh, they had many different people who were nominated so to receive this special educator of the year is quite competitive and of course I’m really proud of that.
AJ: That’s really nice. That came after you had received the Teacher Excellence Award from the College of Education in 1978, I believe it was, ’79. What’s the process involved there uh to, determine who receives this award?

OA: Again, you have student evaluations and based on those student evaluations you are in competition with other faculty members, and a committee, a selection committee chooses you based on your teaching and your teaching evaluations.

AJ: Mm, hmm. That’s really impressive. Now, during all these different things that you were doing, the teaching, the service in the professional community and the university community, you had another um, responsibility I guess I should say, and that responsibility was with, or to the black community providing service to the black community because they often looked to us to be active and involved in things that are important to our particular community. At the same time that we have that responsibility, that expectation, uh, you have the traditional promotion of, teaching, service, and scholarship kinds of things that you have to do, and so sometimes what our black community want us to do, is not always the community involvement that is uh, helpful for promotion and tenure. So how do you reconcile, uh those you know, how do you reconcile being involved in the black community and then having to do all these other things uh that are required of you, how did you manage to do all of it particularly with you were not going to get a whole lot of credit for what you did in the black community, you know what you did in the black church doesn’t go towards p & t, uh, but it means something to the community.

OA: Well I’ve never wanted to divorce myself from who I am, and I am African American, and I like being an African American [break in video] I've always had a life other than my professional life so in being sure that I didn’t become a marginal person because I think you can engage so much into a [work] community and forget the black community I think you can become marginal [breaks in tape] or peripheral on your own, your own cultural community. So I have always been a member, a member for a long time of Delta Sigma Beta Sorority and of course being a sorority person yourself you know how many different projects and activities we have to perform in the community. So I have chosen over the years usually to be chairperson of social action in Delta Sigma Beta Sorority that way I get to do my pet political projects and social projects. So uh with Delta I have been able to participate in the black community in social action political kinds of things. I belong to a women’s group in Columbus, it’s social political and we give scholarships just as Delta Sigma Sorority gives scholarships and I’m usually on those scholarship committees, because you know if you’re working on a university campus you know it’s what twelve, fourteen hour day, if you’re on a scholarship committee you can choose your time to read scholarships, to interview students. So I, I have chosen projects and activities that I could deal with on my own time rather than you know, going to a lot of meetings. I’ve been involved heavily in
churches, wherever I’ve been I’ve always been involved with churches and with young people, um, I have always served on scholarship committees, so I’ve been on, I bet seven or eight scholarship committees, because you get that expertise reading, uh, scholarship nominations and so on and so it’s very easy to from group to group and do scholarships. So it’s been through club membership, and sorority membership, and churches that I have stayed in contact with the African American community, that’s very important to me.

AJ: And then by choosing the area of working with scholarships that relates to your work, your teaching, and so you have a connection there that you would not necessarily have if say you were involved with another type of project in the community.

OA: Right, because I’ve brought my scholarship expertise over to the university, I’ve served on Bolinga Center scholarship committee, I’ve served on the university scholarship committee, so it’s kind of like a continuum of the kinds of activities that I’ve done.

AJ: I’m glad that you explained it that way because I think a lot of times we don’t know how, uh, make time to do all of these different things and at the same time, uh, coordinate our schedule in such a way that it’s beneficial and we aren’t adding a lot of additional time to our already busy schedule. That’s very good. The other thing that you mentioned briefly was that you and Dr. Jones and Williams uh wrote a uh source book on multiculturalism, tell me about some or your other scholarly activities.

OA: I did a book on, we did a resource book in multi-culture. I also did a resource book in teaching the multi-handicapped at the time when there was uh, probably only one good text in that area, and um, so we were talking about how you get everything done, I had two contracts to write this book for, national company, and um, I let my second deadline go because I think I was on one of the presidential search committees, and so, I bring that up because if you are talking about new faculty, you almost have to decide selfishly that I have to get this done and that was one of the things that in doing all these other things I let go which was a fairly important thing. However the source book was used by some other faculty at other universities which I’m very pleased about and I hope to come back to that now that I have the time. I’ve done that and I think that my vitae show shows that I have eight or nine articles that I’ve done in national [referee] journals. Um, also when you’re talking about doing objectives for two or three courses those are considered scholarly activities especially at the time that when we came through because when I came through Wright State we were more in the developmental stage and we were developing a lot of programs and so to develop objectives for courses at that time was seen as a scholar, as a scholarly activity and it certainly should be.
AJ: Okay, you have really been busy teaching, providing service, writing, and in addition to that you have informally served as mentor, as a mentor to faculty and students. Tell me how you got involved in doing that.

OA: Well I like to share, and um, I like teamwork and I found that in scholarly activities and so on, sometimes you do more work if you’re working with someone because you’re motivated to stay on task. So, the idea of sharing, the idea of teaming, always appealed to me, and so with new faculty I have been very open to if there were projects to work with them, to help them and they helped me. So, and I think you learn a great deal too from teaming and sharing, so that’s just part of my personality.

AJ: So, what kinds of kind of mentoring did you do with students, our students here?

OA: Oh, I’ve had, Bolinga Center has had some excellent programs in mentoring, and I’ve had little sisters and brothers who would come to my office when they had time. I found with mentoring students you almost have to go out and get them because they’re so busy and their social lives are busy that sometimes they don’t take advantage of the time that you would be willing to give them, but I have had some students who have come to my office, we’ve talked, we’ve had lunch, I’ve invited them to my house, sometimes that’s not always, that invitation is not always acceptable at the time that they can do it, but a few have.

AJ: You mentioned the Bolinga Center, I have here a picture, I don’t know which year this was you received the award from the Bolinga Center, tell me a little bit about this award.

OA: This award was given for scholarly activities as well as participation with the Bolinga Center and I’m very proud of the plaque that I have from them and also the associations that I have, I continue to have with the Bolinga Center because I, in my contributions to the scholarship here at Wright State, I always designate part of what I give to the Bolinga scholarship. So I’ve enjoyed all the activities that I’ve had with them.

AJ: Now, given all this, your experience in all these various areas and working with different students, different populations, and given the kinds of information that we read about racial climates on different campuses now that currently going on at practically all the state’s large and small universities, how do you compare the racial climate on campuses today with say ten years ago?

OA: Well I mentioned earlier that I think the more, um, different students come in, when I say different I mean culturally different students come into predominately white campuses, uh, there is a potential for more conflict, so I think just by the numbers that have come in, we’re seeing a little more uneasiness I think. Also, anytime there is an economic downturn, uh, I think that people worry about getting mine, and I think we
see that now that the economic situation is somewhat bleak at this point, and um, as you know, budget cuts in higher education, and so the amount of the pie is smaller than it used to be, and so I think sometimes the competition is there and that can create some difficult in relationships.

AJ: I was thinking about some of the recent articles that have been in the paper about Wright State pertaining to race-based problems, and in the past five years we’ve had several initiatives here at the university to try to help us resolve some of these difficulties that we’ve had and trying to get more black faculty and black students here, and, and as you say the economy has a lot to do with, just the general economy has a lot to do with it, and so you wonder, what else can the university do? What other kinds of initiatives are there that can help to reduce the problems that we are having and, I’m hearing you say that when we have these external factors which are very important, the economy and all, and being concerned about providing for yourself, it’s very difficult I guess, for the university to maybe make any more progress maybe then they are currently making, what do you think?

OA: Well I think that it is very important that the top administrators indicate that this is a multi-cultural environment, this is how it’s going to be. I think that should be the number one process and I believe that it’s being done, as I know I’ve heard somethings that are happening, things like the present administration is saying that this is a multi-cultural university and therefore we are going to accept everyone as a human being, a participating human being. To me that’s important.

AJ: So then even though the pie is smaller, uh, there will still be, uh, slices in there for multi-cultural types of efforts.

OA: Absolutely, that’s exactly how I feel, and I think it has to be decided by the top. Somehow if people know that the top is saying, this is the way it is, that makes a difference and just as the top administrators say that, I also think that deans and chairpersons, that attitude has to be for deans and chairpersons too, that we are multi-cultural college or should be, therefore; we will have representatives from a multi-cultural, a mix, because people of different cultural backgrounds do make tremendous contributions to the university, and if there are students representing those cultures, they need to have some models and mentors. And then, Caucasian students need to know what other cultures are like. They’re going to have to work for people of other cultures, they’re going to have to work with people of other cultures, so it would be unfortunate to go out of here without having any more of that cultural experiences and go to a bank, or a company and your boss is African American, or Mexican American or whatever and you have had no experience to deal in a multi-cultural society. And that’s what we are. We are a multi-cultural society, therefore, a university cannot afford to be mono-cultural.
AJ: That’s very good, I appreciate you bringing it out that way because that’s as it should be. As I listen to you, and observe you, as you’re talking about these various things, I am reminded of a very outstanding award that you received and it’s easy to understand why you got this award in 1987, this is the Trustee Award for Faculty Excellence. This is really, really a highlight to me here at Wright State for you to get this award and it was it was especially nice to see you up there delivering Commencement, the Commencement address at UD Arena. That was really, really nice. Tell me about that [inaudible].

OA: That really was the high point of my career. I have received maybe twelve or thirteen different awards, but to receive this award from the university, it was just really high point, and to be able to speak briefly to the graduating class at Commencement, and I understand that that was the first time that a faculty member had been the speaker to the graduates and I want to say that, and I don’t think that I’ve had the chance to say this before, I really appreciated the way that the students listened to me. Now, I’ve been to a lot of graduations and I’ve observed students and some of the antics that they have, you know how noisy they are when people are speaking, and I remember looking out at this large audience at UD, and uh, so many people were paying attention and it was quiet, and I thought, wow, I don’t believe this, you know, and afterwards I really had to almost pinch myself to believe that that was true. To receive this outstanding award from, from the university and then to have the students seem like, seemingly accept the presentation from a faculty member, that was a high point.

AJ: I think all of us are really proud of you, including the students, they were probably saying, wow, and their parents too, really an outstanding occasion there.

OA: I see people now who remember me by the graduation comments that I made so, it was wonderful, and I won’t forget that.

AJ: Given all the wonderful things that you’ve done in your professional career and your personal life, if you were to, uh, had a chance to do things differently at Wright State, is there anything that you would do differently? Would you do more of the same, or less of the same, or would you place more emphasis on another area than on the ones that you did? Is there anything that you would do differently?

OA: I think the university has gone through phases and we have behaved and delivered according to where the university was at that time. So when I came, as I indicated earlier, the university was in a period of growth and developing new programs, and trying to make a name for itself. And so I feel that many of us worked diligently to help the university make that name and become the kind of university that we wanted. I think now that the university has “grown up” as we often say, that it is in a different phase, that developing is not the most important quality now. Expanding, uh, making the
university more visible is probably where it is now. So if I were to come now it would be a whole different ballgame, but, I will say that I think that if I were coming now as a new faculty, I would look at my skills that I was bringing in and focus on that. And I think that I would be careful not to over-extend myself to not focus upon the development of me as a faculty. Because I think that it is going to be much more competitive for promotion and tenure, I think the person has to do more research, therefore to be pulled off to a number of committees as I was in that development stage, probably is going to be detrimental to a new faculty who will have to compete for promotion and tenure, with probably the promotion and tenure committee looking heavily at what you've done as far as research is concerned. Now I'm hoping that a lot of still consideration is given to teaching because we are a teaching university but it's going to be less on, promotion and tenure, I think will be less on teaching and scholar, and uh, service, and more on research and scholarship and I think any new faculty coming in must realize that this is a phase that the university, in which the university itself is trying to be visible. So, one needs to write big grants, and one needs to do research, and so I would come in as a new faculty doing at this point doing what the university needs and what the university is going to reward.

AJ: That's uh, a good point. But in addition to the emphasis going to research now and given the strategic plan that the university developed and adopted a couple of, a few years ago which emphasizes, strongly emphasizes, service, community service and outreach kinds of things, I hear that they are going to start looking at service differently too, and start rewarding it, I think you may recall that in those three areas service has not always been rewarded as highly as some of the others but uh, because as you say their focus has changed, they're going to look at those areas differently, so in addition to research they are also looking more at the types of outreach kinds of things that we're doing in the service area.

OA: And, I think that if, if a person is going to be doing service heavily, that should be carefully documented and should made, should be made as scholarly as possible, and you can make service scholarly.

AJ: Well, now that you're retired, all the way up to today, what has life been like, post Wright State?

OA: It's been wonderful. It's been wonderful but I have been very busy. I've tried to look at myself and grow. I'm in the period of, I'm still in the period of growth and development, and I've started to look at other areas. I'm very interested in children, and the plight of children at this point in our history. So I, I am involved in a number of things in early childhood and in trying to get involved socially as well as politically with what's better for children at this point, so um.
AJ: Sounds exciting.

OA: I'm really excited about my new interest.

AJ: Your new phase.

OA: My new phase.

AJ: Okay, well thank you so much for joining us today Oris, it's been real nice talking with you.

OA: It's been nice to be here Alyce, I'm very proud of your project.

AJ: Thank you.